

C.I.A in Search of a Role

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 8 — With his retirement as the Government's chief spymaster, William H. Webster leaves the Central Intelligence Agency with its image and internal controls on misdeeds visibly stronger, but with its own destiny muddled and its performance in the Persian Gulf crisis under a cloud.

News Analysis

Charting a new role in a world no longer chilled by the cold war will be the overriding task of his successor, and Mr. Webster's own difficulty in doing so may be one reason that he is leaving. President Bush announced Mr. Webster's decision today but did not name a successor.

When Mr. Webster came to the intelligence agency in 1987, on the heels of William J. Casey and the Iran-contra affair, the situation in American intelligence was the opposite. The agency was swamped in scandal over secret arms sales to Iran and the Nicaraguan rebels but nevertheless driven by a single cause: the defeat of America's archenemy, the Soviet Union and its proxies in the third world.

Public Trust Restored

Mr. Webster's greatest accomplishment, Administration experts agree, was his restoration of public trust in American intelligence after the political and policy debacle of the Iran-contra scandal.

"The Agency was perilously close four years ago to sliding back into the public image of the 'rogue elephant,'" Bobby Ray Inman, a former Deputy Director of the C.I.A. and an intelligence adviser to Mr. Bush, said today. "The first and foremost job that Webster did, and at a critical time, was to arrest that and get the presumption back to reality."

Mr. Webster imposed strict controls over secret operations like the Iran-contra arms sales, and he disciplined several lower-ranking agency officials involved in the sales. Those public actions reassured a suspicious Congress and raised morale in the intelligence agencies, where advocates of the C.I.A.'s involvement in the affair were a minority.

But as morale and direction improved within the intelligence agency, the collapse of the Soviet military and ideological threat in 1989 and 1990 suddenly deprived the agency and its brethren organizations of the purpose that drove it for four decades. And while Mr. Webster made a mark in restoring the heart of American intelligence to its proper place, he leaves it without its old soul.

"We set up an intelligence apparatus in the 1940's for a specific purpose, to monitor a military and political challenge from the Soviet Union," said one former intelligence official who spoke on condition of anonymity. "When we were planning to meet this challenge, our assumption was that it would come in the form of war. But it didn't; it came in the form of peace. And we are basically unprepared to deal with it."

Agency officials argue that the organization under Mr. Webster has been planning for years for a world without a preeminent Soviet threat. Although critics such as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, have argued otherwise, some evidence supports the officials' assertion.

Five months after Mr. Webster took office in 1987, for example, the agency sent President Reagan a classified report entitled "Eastern Europe: Impact of Gorbachev's Agenda on Stability," which predicted outright that Soviet political and economic reforms taking place under Mikhail S. Gorbachev would infect the old East Bloc, producing a political upheaval within several years.

Speed of Change a Surprise

Similarly, the agency sent Mr. Bush a 1989 classified report that predicted increased economic crisis and political instability within the Soviet Union and its ethnic republics as Mr. Gorbachev's policies unleashed national aspirations and demand for goods that even the Soviet leader's reforms could not accommodate.

Mr. Webster since has acknowledged in interviews that the intelligence agency did not anticipate the speed or sweep of those upheavals, but that he believes its assessments were generally accurate.

In recent months, Mr. Webster has come under fire from some in Congress who have complained that he has not offered a dynamic plan to reshape

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American intelligence for a post-cold war world. Both the House and Senate intelligence committees are now studying legislation that would impose new orders on the \$30 billion-a-year intelligence establishment.

Mr. Webster's supporters say that he sought to outline new roles for the intelligence agency's, even before the Soviet Union's difficulties. Mr. Webster set up a Federal counter-terrorism center to coordinate American and foreign intelligence on global terrorism and a second center to integrate intelligence and law-enforcement efforts against narcotics producers and traffickers.

More recently, he has publicly advocated collecting more intelligence on foreign threats to the American economy, such as companies that steal American trade secrets and governments that use espionage to learn about American economic strategies.

But such new roles have been unpopular among some intelligence officials, who question the agency's involvement in law-enforcement missions or the practicality of using economic intelligence on foreign rivals to benefit American companies.

Challenge Facing Successor

Whoever succeeds Mr. Webster must quickly resolve those differences and convince Congress that the agency and other espionage agencies have compelling missions to perform in the absence of a serious threat of global war.

The task is made doubly hard by Congress's own skepticism about the ability of American espionage agencies to provide accurate and farsighted information about either its enemies or its friends.

Congress's faith has been shaken by predictions in such hot spots as Afghanistan, where the C.I.A. and many other agencies forecast in 1989 that the nation's Soviet-backed regime would collapse within weeks after Moscow withdrew its troops. Two years later, the Afghan Army has grown stronger and has battled United States-backed guerrilla forces to a stalemate.

More recently, some legislators have criticized the agency's analysis of intelligence on Iraq and its president, Saddam Hussein.

Less than a year before Iraq invaded

Kuwait last August, C.I.A. analysts forecast incorrectly that Mr. Hussein would shy from military adventures in order to rebuild his nation's economy after an eight-year war with Iran.

Analysts in several intelligence agencies were also slow to conclude that Iraq's buildup of forces at the Kuwait border would lead to an invasion, and virtually no one foresaw that he would seize all of Kuwait and precipitate an international crisis.

Many experts in the establishment complain that such failures are rooted in the C.I.A.'s 20-year emphasis on satellites and other technical wizardry to collect intelligence rather than on traditional spies who collect information firsthand and up close.

Traditional Role Stressed

"Largely speaking, in broad parts of the world we're interested in, we have no special sources, no particular or unique sources of information," said one former Congressional intelligence expert who spoke on condition of anonymity. "If you expect our clandestine services to have recruited lots of people in the Politburo, then we're a failure."

Mr. Webster's associates say that he has made major efforts within the agency, amid resistance from some officials, to stress the traditional espionage of individual agents abroad. He has also intensified the agency's language training and begun to aggressively recruit ethnic minorities and technical specialists, a departure from the spy of agency lore, who was a white, male, Ivy League-educated expert in the liberal arts.

Because recruiting, training and placing agents takes years, the real fruits of Mr. Webster's effort will not be seen until the next century.

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Administration officials have said that the leading contender to replace Mr. Webster is Robert M. Gates, deputy National Security Adviser. Mr. Gates, right, joined John H. Sununu, the White House chief of staff, at Mr. Bush's news conference yesterday.